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ABSTRACT

The paper examines ways to enhance the transition of handicapped students from special preschools to public school kindergartens. The importance of careful planning, evaluation, and modification for individual needs is stressed. The effects of larger class size in kindergartens include requirements for students to obey group instructions, work well independently for at least 10 minutes, and use peers as well as the teacher as resources. The increased student-teacher ratio of kindergarten is noted, and effects on individual responsibility and time allotment are considered. Suggestions are offered regarding organizing transitions for success, including establishing communication lines between agencies and among staff members. A timeline presents guidelines for when, where, how, and what type of informtion should be communicated in planning the transition. The paper concludes by outlining 14 practical steps whereby preschool and kindergarten teachers can prepare children for transitions, including visits to preschools by kindergarten teachers, specification of transition skills on student individualized education programs, and systematic fading out of individual cues and directions to make the preschool more kindergarten-like. The preschool teacher's role is also discussed. (CL)

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Preparing Teachers and Children for Transitions from Special Preschool Programs to Public School Kindergartens

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Preparing Teachers and Children for Transitions from Special Preschool Programs to Public School Kindergartens

The transition of young children from early intervention programs to kindergarten is a complex and important move. This change is one of the first major transitions for most young children and their families. Even when young children are "normal," kindergarten entry is often surrounded by uncertainty and stress--"Will I get lost in the big school?" worries the child, while the parent wonders, "Will the teacher have time to talk with my child?" "Will my child behave well in such a large class?" "Is he really ready?" When a child has special needs, plus a history of delay in one or more developmental areas, perhaps plus a continuing need for special services not provided to all the other children, then the stress surrounding kindergarten entry often is even greater than for normal children and their families.

Parents and professionals are well aware that a good start in public school is important in shaping the child's attitudes toward the school experience. Both are aware of the importance of finding the right placement for a particular handicapped child and of supporting that placement with the right combination of special services. This workshop will stress that transitions will be more successful for more children if they include careful planning, preparation of the child for transition, cooperative decision-making by parents and professionals, monitoring of the child's adjustment, and continuing communication by all members of the transition team, including parents.

The workshop today is a product of a Handicapped Children's Early Education Program demonstration project at the University of Kansas. Our project is called "Planning School Transitions: Family and Professional Collaboration." The project's philosophy is that close cooperation between the young child's parents, preschool teacher, kindergarten teacher, and other professionals at both levels yields big benefits in the child's successful adjustment to kindergarten. Specific procedures and instruments are being developed to help that cooperation occur.

We believe that that the transition process should be carefully planned, evaluated, and modified according to the needs of individual children and their famillies. Children and parents should be prepared for the changes they will meet in the other school program. Preschool to kindergarten is likely to be one of the first major transitions that handicapped children and their parents navigate. The attitudes and actions which families use in this transition will probably be employed again in their later life changes. A smooth transition to kindergarten will be a good precedent for later transitions. Strategies for cooperative decision-making which families master now will continue to be useful in later educational planning for their handicapped child. A workshop conducted by our project this morning focused on family issues.

This afternoon my colleague Ann Hains and I wish to concentrate on ways that teachers, administrators, and other professionals can help children at risk make the transition to kindergarten successfully.

The first important point to note is that special preschools and kindergartens are quite different in a number of significant ways. Our project has defined some of these differences during systematic observations in numerous classrooms and during structured interviews with more than 80 teachers. The child who is to succeed in transition will have to adjust to major differences between the two types of programs.

The most obvious difference is class size. Special preschools often have fewer than 10 children in a class, while kindergartens commonly have 20 to 30 children in a class. Class size affects all sorts of practices in the classroom. Common to all of them is that the kindergarten child must function more as a group member and also perform more independently than in special preschool. There will be less individual attention, less individual instruction, and less individual reinforcement than in the home or the early intervention program.

In special preschool each child may be working on a different task during the preacademic time. Directions will usually be given individually, often prefaced by the teacher calling the child's name to gain attention. In kindergarten, activities are planned for the group and directions are usually presented to the whole group. Individual names are seldom called for directions, unless the child is obviously confused or off-task. The child who copes well with the large class size of kindergarten will obey group instructions, will work well independently for at least 10 minutes, and will use peers as well as the teacher as resources.

Preschool classrooms with their smaller number of students are seldom crowded. That's not the case in kindergarten. Children who have difficulty motor planning and negotiating use of space may be challenged by the press of bodies in a kindergarten coat area, for example. Children who cope successfully with kindergarten crowding will be aware of their own body space and will respect that of other children. They will also be skilled in turntaking.

In many preschools children can move rather freely from place to place. However, kindergarten, with its larger number of students, usually structures movement more. Most kindergartens use lines and require children to wait quietly while lines form. Lining up and waiting in line are rather complex skills which the successful kindergartener is expected to master early in the year.

Preschool children are usually closely supervised on the playground, and they need to share playground toys with only a few other children. Public school playgrounds are often large and loosely supervised, and they frequently contain several older classes in addition to the kindergarten group. Successful kindergarteners take steps to remain safe on the playground when older children are present and to entertain themselves with peers when a teacher in not nearby.

With a small number of students, special preschool teachers can take time to tell each student how and where to sit during large group times. Kindergarten teachers often expect children to clump around them, to respect the space of other children, to keep hands and feet to themselves, and to attend for up to a half

hour at a time while sitting appropriately. The kindergarten lacks the preschool's environmental support for attending during large group time. Yet kindergarten children are expected to sit and attend appropriately.

Apart from absolute number of children, the special preschool and the kindergarten usually also differ dramatically on adult-child ratio in the classroom. In a study of 22 classrooms I did last year in eastern Kansas, I found the average ratio in preschool special education to be one adult for each three children. The ratio in kindergarten was one adult for each fourteen children. Now I live in a central Kansas county where there is no tradition of paraprofessionals in kindergarten classes; the adult-child ratio probably averages one to 25. Thus special needs children in this county go from a ratio of one to three to a ratio of one to 25.

Again there are numerous effects when the number of children for each adult increases so dramatically. For example, directions must be given to the group rather than to individuals.

Certain learnings take on more importance. For example, in special preschool, where several adults are present to help, children practice self-care skills with physical assistance from adults. On the other hand, the kindergarten teacher, often working alone, expects near independence in toileting, washing, and dressing.

Another effect of ratio concerns work times. Preschool teachers usually supervise small group activities quite directly, while the kindergarten teacher supervises four or more different

groups of children concurrently. The kindergarten practice requires rather sophisticated independent work skills on the part of the children.

When special education programs have several adults present, teachers may tend to set out materials for the children and to clean up after them. Kindergarten teachers usually place much more responsibility for care of personal and classroom work materials onto the children.

Another difference concerns allottment of time. Special preschools usually have a lengthy choice time when social interaction is the main goal; teachers are available to model social conversation and sharing. Likewise snacktime is a daily occasion for peer social interaction in most early intervention programs. However, playtime is disappearing from kindergartens today. So is social snack--often eating does not occur in kindergarten, in Kansas at least, but when it does, it is often accompanied by the reading of a book or the viewing of a filmstrip. Social skill development in kindergarten is often pursued through group activities, such as sharing time; even recess activities may be structured by the teacher.

In addition to these programatic differences, the transition from special preschool to kindergarten also requires the child to make new friends, meet new teachers and therapists, learn new names, locate new rooms, follow new rules, remember new routines, acquire new skills, sing new songs, find new materials, and discover the way back home at the end of the session. All these types of new learnings will recur every time the child makes an educational change. Strategies acquired for mastering

all this new knowledge will be used again and again throughout the child's life.

Yet another major difference between special preschool and kindergarten is the role played by parents. Parents of young handicapped children have often been in daily conversation with their child's preschool teacher. Sometimes this happens by phone, and sometimes while they are delivering or picking up the child at the school. Information about the child as well as bits of family history are regularly exchanged. Kindergarten teachers, with 50 or 60 families to relate to, cannot encourage this type of daily sharing. It is often difficult for parents who are deeply concerned about the adjustment of their child with special needs to determine when and how often it is appropriate to take the teacher's time to discuss the child's progress.

Elizabeth Vincent (1982) has suggested that a prime way to evaluate our early intervention programs is to determine the success of our graduates in adjusting to their next environment--in this case, kindergarten. Did skills learned in preschool generalize to kindergarten? Were expected skills available for use? Did the children demonstrate flexibility when they encountered changes in routines? Did they master kindergarten routines as quickly as the other children?

Ann is going to give you a framework for organizing transitions for success. Then I will return with some pointers for the school personnel closest to the transition--the preschool and kindergarten teachers.

When children leave preschool and enter kindergarten, they may be moving from one service agency to another agency (often the public school system). Communication between the sending and receiving agencies is critical to ensure that the child's educational program continues without serious interruption, that appropriate services are provided and that the child and family are satisfied with the change in program.

Formal lines of communication should be established between the two agencies to create an organized and efficient transition. A staff member within each agency should be appointed to coordinate the planning and to serve as the initial contact person for staff from the other agency and for the family of the child who is changing programs. This role often is assumed by a social worker, child development specialist, or psychologist.

Besides establishing communication lines between the agencies, lines of communication within each agency also should be designated, whether formally or informally. This will help to ensure that information which has been received from the sending agency reaches the staff members who are planning the child's school program. Communication within agencies is often both hierarchical and lateral. For example, the staff member coordinating kindergarden transitions in a school district may send information through a hierarchy of staff, communicating first with the special services director and/or the school principal, who in turn communicate with the classroom teacher, and support staff. Communication may also occur in a lateral fashion, when information is shared among teachers and therapists; for instance the teacher may send information to the

speech therapist, the resource room teacher, the librarian, and the gym teacher.

A breakdown in communication between the adminstration and teaching staff or lack of communication between the teaching staff will affect the quality of services provided to the child and the probability that the child's transition will be trouble free. Agencies should establish guidelines regarding who receives what information and when. A central record system that is accessible to direct service staff within the child's school building is recommended. The files should be systematically monitored to ensure that all relevent staff have read the child's file before the child arrives in the new program. The classroom teacher, above all, should have direct access to information on the child, as the classroom is the child's primary placement. The information should assist the teacher and other staff to prepare appropriately for the child's special needs.

Communication should continue between and within agencies after the child's transition, as well. The following timeline, which will be handed out, provides guidelines for when, where, how, and what information may be communicated in planning the transition. The following steps are suggestions which may be modified to the individual needs of both agencies.

1) A staff member from the preschool program is selected to coordinate the preschool program's transition activities and to serve as a liason with the public school district.

2) A staff member from the public school district is appointed to coordinate transition activities related to the school district and to serve as a liason with the preschool program(s).

3) Preschool staff complete a brief, initial summary report on child's progress based on IEP, and they identify assessment data available.

4) Preschool staff meet with parents to:

a) Share progress report and gather information from parents regarding child's progress
b) Review assessment data which may be useful to the school district
c) Provide information regarding transition planning and the parents' role in planning (e.g., future meetings, school visits)
d) Obtain parent permission for release of information to the school district

5) Preschool transition coordinator meets with school district transition coordinator to discuss progress report and assessment information. Together they identify any additional assessments needed for a placement decision and which agency (preschool or public school) will be responsible for conducting those assessments.

6) Additional assessments are completed by the appropriate agency.

7) Informal transition conferences are held to identify:

a) Potential placements
b) Special services required by child
c) Transportation needs
d) Health needs
e) Relevant family needs

8) Preschool and school district coordinators make arrangements for potential receiving teachers to visit the preschool to observe child. Likewise, similar arrangements are made for sending teachers to visit potential receiving programs. These visits are important since teachers need to consider differences in classroom environments so that they can plan to minimize those differences.

9) A workshop for parents should be presented on "Preparing Your Child for Public School." The format should include time available for questions and answers as well as informal conversation.

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10) Preschool coordinator informs parents of potential placements, and the school district coordinator arranges for parents to observe these programs.

11) Formal placement conference is held with parents, preschool coordinator, school district coordinator, and other recommended staff. If questions remain regarding appropriateness of placement, a decision may be made to consider a 30-day trial (diagnostic) placement with the final decision following the end of the trial period. A diagnostic IEP is written for children entering diagnostic placements.

12) Child visits future program.

13) Records are sent to the receiving program. The sending staff should ensure that these records are pertinent to the child's next placement and that parent release forms are available. The receiving program should ensure that the appropriate staff member(s) know about such records and have access to them.

14) After the child has entered the new program, frequent consultation to the receiving teacher should be provided if the child is considered at risk in the new placement. Consultation might be delivered by: the sending preschool teacher or early childhood coordinator, the special services coordinator, resource room teacher, or school psychologist. If the sending program is amenable, periodic contact should be maintained between the receiving teacher and the sending teacher, at least during the initial months of school, so that information may continue to be exchanged and effective teaching strategies discussed.

In summary, effective inter-agency interaction requires planning so that appropriate personnel and timely events are not overlooked. When establishing formal channels of communication between agencies, staff persons must identify who should communicate, what shall be communicated, what manner the communication should flow, and how to obtain agreement between agencies on communication guidelines. Planning and communication between the sending teacher, receiving teacher, the family, and relevant agencies can be critical for creating a successful kindergarten experience for the handicapped child and in assuring that the family receives appropriate services.

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Now Sharon will talk about some practical ideas and activities for preschool and kindergarten teachers to use when preparing children for transitions.

Teachers, along with parents, interact with the child every day. Teacher attitudes, teacher instructional priorities, and teacher communications with other members of the transition team shape the child's transition.

In order for both the sending teacher and the receiving teacher to facilitate the child's transition, each needs to be informed about the other's classroom--that is, the classrooms to which the child is possibly going and the one where the child has already been. By far the best way to learn about other programs is to visit them on a typical day. Our project has developed a checklist for classroom visits. This is included in your workshop packet. Preschool teachers should visit kindergartens with this form early, rather than late, in the school year. Fall is the best time because that classroom environment is the one the preschool graduate will enter. On the contrary, kindergarten teachers will benefit most from visiting preschools in the spring, when early childhood programs have already incorporated most of the routines and skills they are going to teach before school ends.

We believe that these teacher visits are extremely valuable. It may be necessary for administrators to budget funds to hire substitutes to allow the visits to occur. If so, the money will be well spent. Visiting classrooms involved in the transition will provide two types of information. First of all, it will yield a great deal of data useful in making placement decisions

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for children in the spring. Second, it will help both teachers to modify their instruction to promote children's successful transition to other classrooms. Let's talk about these modifications in more detail.

Modifications in the preschool: When the child's IEP is written at the beginning of the pre-kindergarten year, it should include a goal of preparing the child for the next educational environment. After the preschool teacher has visited kindergarten classrooms in which the child might be placed, it will be apparent which kindergarten practices differ markedly from preschool practices. Some of the special skills expected by the kindergarten teacher and some common kindergarten routines should be targeted for teaching during the preschool year, especially in the spring.

We special educators task analyze and sequentially teach academic objectives. We should do the same thing with skills such as standing in line, obtaining work materials independently, working in a small group without immediate supervision, following group instructions, and independent toileting. The "Planning School Transistions" project is currently working on a curriculum which will include instructional strategies and lists of activities and materials to help develop these "kindergarten survival skills." Kindergarten survival skills--the name may not be as overly dramatic as it seems. Preliminary results from interviews with 46 educators by our project staff suggest that a number of skill areas are more important than academics skills for kindergarten success. These more important skill areas

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include positive classroom conduct, direction-following, social interaction, and self-care skills. Work on these skill areas should certainly be included in IEP objectives as we prepare preschool children with special needs for transition to mainstream kindergartens.

Another thing preschool teachers can do in the spring of the year is to make their classes more "kindergarten-like" in terms of adult-child ratio. Put children who are kindergarten-bound into a large group with one teacher, and assign the rest of the adults to work with lower functioning children. Systematically fade out individual cues and individual directions. Eliminate physical prompts. Teach children to obey group instructions the first time they are presented. Provide times in the day when these children must wait, and teach them strategies for waiting without disturbing their neighbors. Teach them to ask questions if they don't understand directions. Teach them to watch peers for clues as to what is expected. Teach them to clean up their work area when the assigned task is completed and then to find worthwhile activity, such as reading or drawing, to fill the remaining time in the period. Even if the design of the preschool facility makes it seem ridiculous, teach children to walk in lines to certain activities. Be sure they can respond appropriately to words frequently used in kindergarten directions: "draw a ring around," "underline," "color," "cross out," and "cut on the line." Teach them to raise their hands before talking in a structured group situation, and show them how to maintain eye contact with a speaker.

Yet a third thing that the preschool teacher can do is to

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teach for generalization to new settings and conditions (Stokes & Baer, 1977; Epps, Thompson & Lane, 1985). When a child is first learning a new skill, it may be necessary to be consistent in the approach used. However, it is very important that we early interventionists not only change behavior but also provide for its generalization to other environments. Once a behavior is becoming established, systematically vary the person who gives instructions, the nature of the cue, the location of the task, the time of day, the type of pupil response required, or the types of reinforcement given--so that the student will be flexible in complying with teacher instructions in the kindergarten setting.

Other contributions of the preschool teacher: The preschool teacher needs to keep records of effective materials and activities for the child as well as anecdotes which illustrate how the child accomplished stated objectives. Other information helpful for later instructional planning includes topics of high interest to the child, media which the child enjoys, and reinforcers which have been effective. Community agencies and medical personnel who have been especially helpful for teaching the child should be listed for future reference.

The preschool teacher offers a recommendation for the child's placement. This recommendation is based upon knowledge of potential classrooms gained during the fall visits, personal experience teaching the child, and information compiled from other members of the transition team. The teacher participates in the conferences which determine kindergarten placement.

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Throughout the transition process the preschool teacher supports the parents. This includes explaining transition procdures to them; encouraging their efforts to teach the child and to plan for the future; providing them with information about their child's school progress related both to the child's own baseline and to national norms; offering referrals to services as requested; helping them arrange visits to potential classrooms; and expressing confidence that the child will thrive in the new program.

Finally, the preschool teacher communicates with the kindergarten teacher. This involves writing a report which summarizes the child's performance and instructional needs (Fowler, 1982), sending records according to the district's transition plan, initiating contact with the kindergarten teacher in the spring, and conferring with the receiving teacher on the first day of school and at least weekly thereafter until the child is well established in kindergarten. The sending teacher must realize that some skills mastered in preschool may not readily generalize to the new classroom (Carden-Smith & Fowler, 1983; Walker & Buckley, 1976). Suggestions of teaching strategies which have been effective in the past might be shared. Equipment and physical adaptations used by the child may need to be demonstrated. One of the most important things that the special preschool teacher can do is to convey confidence in the kindergarten teacher's ability to teach the child as well as the child's ability to master new routines and skills.

<u>The kindergarten teacher:</u> The kindergarten teacher receives information about the child from the IEP conference, from formal

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reports, and from informal contacts with the parents and the preschool teacher. Information about preschool routines familiar to the child comes from the spring visit the kindergarten teacher makes to the preschool classroom. All of this helps the kindergarten teacher draw up a list of functional strengths and weaknesses for the child in the new environment. Traditional kindergarten routines then need to be evaluated in terms of the entry skills of new students; perhaps traditional activities need to be modified to promote success for every child. Conduct, work skills, and ways of responding appropriately need to be specifically taught in addition to academic content--as one teacher said, "First I tell them what we are going to do, then we do it, and then I tell them what they did well and why it was such a good job." Instruction aimed at the entire kindergarten class should define appropriate behaviors and publicly name and reward those behaviors when they occur. Special teaching and individual adaptations may be necessary if a child is having difficulty adjusting to the new classroom.

The kindergarten teacher should confer with the preschool teacher during the first week of school and at least weekly thereafter until the child is well established in kindergarten (Fowler & Hains, 1985). Ideas for teaching the child might be discussed. Often the preschool teacher's experience with the child can prevent missteps in the kindergarten and minimize failure for the child and the loss of valuable time.

Finally, the kindergarten teacher needs to communicate with the parents. A few words of reassurance or a brief note during

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the first days of school will be appreciated by anxious parents of a child with special needs. Kindergarten teachers should establish guidelines to help parents know when and how to contact the school. Newsletters are one way to provide program information to many parents at one time.

As with so many other human undertakings, honest and frequent communication among the primary persons involved in the child's transition will dramatically increase the chances of its success.

Summary and Conclusion

Careful planning plus adequate and timely communication between teachers and agencies can minimize the almost inevitable transition-related stress which children and their families often experience when involved in a school transition. The transition from preschool to kindergarten often involves a variety of changes and challenges for handicapped children and their families. The child must adapt to new routines, people, situations, and places. The family is faced with gathering and sorting informatioon, planning, and decision-making. Timely interaction by the preschool and kindergarten teachers, as well as agency staffs can help minimize transition-related stress for the family and assure a successful school transition.

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